

Another Funerary Portrait from Cyrenaica in the British Museum

A peculiar and very distinct group of portraits have in recent years aroused the interest of an increasing number of students of Roman art. These are the Cyrenaican funerary portraits, some 117 of which were studied and published for the first time as a separate series by E. Rosenbaum in 1960¹. Several of these portraits have found their way into European collections of ancient sculpture in the last two centuries. One is presently housed in the Museo Nazionale in Rome², and six others are in the collection of the British Museum³. Six of the portraits published by Rosenbaum come from the British Museum⁴. To these a seventh one (PLATE 00) should be added, which has remained unpublished having escaped the attention

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of both Rosenbaum and the compiler of the volume devoted to Cyrenaica of the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani*. This type of funerary portrait has attracted the attention of distinguished scholars because of the mention of it in the *Geographia* of Strabo. The British Museum⁵.

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Another Funerary Portrait from Cyrenaica in the British Museum

A peculiar and very distinct group of portraits have in recent years aroused the interest of an increasing number of students of Roman art. These are the Cyrenaican funerary portraits, some 117 of which were studied and published for the first time as a separate series by E. Rosenbaum in 1960¹. Several of these portraits have found their way into European collections of ancient sculpture in these last two centuries. One is presently housed in the Museo Nazionale in Rome², and six are in the possession of the Museum Authorities in Malta³. Six of the portraits published by Rosenbaum come from the British Museum⁴. To these a seventh one (PLATE 00) should be added, which has remained unpublished having escaped the attention of both Rosenbaum and the compiler of the volume devoted to Cyrenaica of the *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* for Great Britain⁵. Considering the easily noticeable character of this type of funerary sculpture it is somewhat surprising that neither of the two distinguished scholars became aware of the existence of this portrait. It has to be said, however, that no mention of it is made in either Smith and Porcher,⁶ or the catalogue of sculpture of the British Museum⁷.

The Cyrenaican funerary portraits are essentially busts carved in marble — though one or two examples in local limestone are not lacking — each representing the head and part of the chest of the sitter. They appear for the first time in Cyrenaica soon after 75 B.C., when the latter was constituted as a Roman province after more than twenty years of undefined autonomy, and continue to be produced until the first half of the fourth century A.D. The great majority of portraits, however, are datable to the first and second centuries A.D. They were produced in series and show a striking uniformity in the shape of the bust and the design of the drapery. The individual features and hairstyle of the sitter are, nevertheless, faithfully reproduced except for a few busts which are deprived of their naturalism more through the lack of skill of the carver than through any serious attempt at artistic abstraction.

These Cyrenaican busts are quite unique in shape and they form a class of portraits of their own. They are immediately recognisable, mainly because of the two flat surfaces descending along the neck from the hair behind the ears to the shoulders. These flat strips recall similar features in contemporary Egyptian mummy-portraits and plaster masks⁸, and may possibly be derived from the shape of the ceremonial wig of earlier Egyptian sculpture⁹. The busts are also very frontal, with both chest and head facing rigidly the spectator, and completely flat at the back. This strict frontality is due to the position for which they were intended, namely, flat against the wall inside small rectangular niches.

These niches were carved in the facades of rock-out tombs which, in most cases, were tombs of earlier periods reused for the same purpose in Roman times¹⁰. This custom of putting marble portraits of the dead on their respective tombs was widely diffused in the whole province of Cyrenaica and some examples have been discovered in Benghazi, Beida and Apollonia. But the overwhelming majority of busts come from the necropoleis of the city of Cyrene.

The unpublished British Museum portrait displays the characteristic Cyrenaican shape with the usual plain surfaces falling vertically along the neck from the ears to the shoulders¹¹. In this case they are not very conspicuous because the space they fill is rather small. The bust is flat at the back and sides, where the surface is blocked out roughly by random blows of the chisel. It is also flat at the bottom, a feature which, according to Rosenbaum, appears only from Hadrian's reign onwards, but which has been found to occur in earlier examples¹². The person portrayed wears a tunic and a mantle and, as usual, not enough of the drapery is shown to enable us to decide whether a toga or a simple cloak is worn. The folds of the mantle are plastically modelled, though somewhat rigid, and meet in a tilted V-shape on the chest. On the right shoulder the mantle seems to end too high up towards the back of the head.



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The bust portrays a man in his thirties wearing a short but thick beard. The hair presents itself as a thick mass of tufty locks set in a more or less disorderly fashion and partially covering the ears. Both hair and beard are very corroded and it is difficult to determine whether they were worked in great detail or not. The eyes are almond-shaped with heavy upper lids; the right one is even thicker and lower than the left one. The mouth is wide and curves down towards the corners. It is separated from the cheeks by somewhat deep naso-labial folds.

The weathered state of the marble does not allow a satisfactory appreciation of the artistic merit of this portrait. It would be quite safe, nevertheless, to regard it as one of the best pieces of Cyrenaican funerary art in the Roman period. The planes of the face are not flat but fused together smoothly without any sharp angles. A slight expression of dissatisfaction is imparted to the face from the downward curve of the mouth.

This portrait bears a great resemblance to some of the Cyrenaican funerary busts dated to the Hadrianic period, especially to Rosenbaum's no.237¹³. They both share the same construction of the head, the same type of beard and shape of mouth, although the hair-style and the formation of the drapery are essentially different. The treatment of the hair is closer to that of nos.233–235,¹⁴ and its asymmetrical design on the forehead is paralleled by no.288¹⁵.

From the Imperial portraiture some comparisons can be made with the portraits of Hadrian¹⁶. But the hair-style and the cut of the beard seem to be much closer to those worn by portraits of Antoninus Pius, such as the bust in the Museo Nazionale, Rome,¹⁷ the head from Ostia in the Vatican, Croce Greca 595,¹⁸ and the bust in the British Museum, also from Cyrene.¹⁹ The bust, therefore, was almost certainly produced sometime during the reign of Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138–161).

Such an advanced date in the second century A.D. compels us to observe two outstanding technical features in the carving of the head. In the first place, we note that the irises and pupils are not plastically indicated in the eyes, a technical expedient which was widely used in Imperial portraiture from the middle of Hadrian's reign onwards. Secondly, no apparent use is made of the running drill, which was well on its way to becoming universal in Roman sculpture during the reign of the first of the Antonines. The absence of both technical devices is a very remarkable and regular feature in Cyrenaican funerary portraiture.

From the technical point of view one should remark also that the right side of the bust is considerably thicker than the left side. This anomaly occurs also in No.VI of the Maltese group of Cyrenaican portraits, and suggests another instance of the use of scrap material. The block of marble from which the bust is carved was shaped in such a manner as to force the carver to make the head face frontally and the chest obliquely to the right.

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Appendix

I take this opportunity to propose another addition to the list of Cyrenaican funerary portraits. This time it is a female bust and is recorded to have been seen in Nîmes, 'chez un marchand' back in 1923²⁰. Although the author refers to its alleged provenance from the surroundings of Nîmes, the shape of the bust, cut almost in relief, and the two lateral flat strips assure us of its Cyrenaican origin. The necklace adorning the neck occurs also on Rosenbaum's no.251²¹. Though the illustration in Esperandieu is not very clear, one can still distinguish a series of small curls along the line of the hair on the forehead. These curls were very fashionable in the Julio-Claudian period²². On top of the head the hair, which is parted in the middle and drawn back in strands, seems to be gathered in a flat bun which is hardly visible. Both curls and bun form part of the hair-style worn by Rosenbaum's no.217,²³ even if the curls are much more interspaced in the Nîmes piece.

The hair-style suggests a date in the first half of the first century A.D.

Notes and References

1. E. Rosenbaum, *A Catalogue of the Cyrenaican Portrait Sculpture* (London 1960 nos.185–283, 299–318. To my knowledge only one such portrait had previously been published in S. Ferri, *L'Arte sul Danubio* (Milan 1933) 132–3, fig.160. Ferri, however, used it only to illustrate Roman art in a former Greek colony and missed out its importance as a specimen of a distinct group of portraits.
2. Rosenbaum, no.266. The portrait will be published more extensively in an article by L. Bacchielli in *Quaderni di Archeologia della Libia* 9 (1977). Another article by L. Beschi, on some Cyrenaican portraits in Crete, is due to appear in *Quaderni di Archeologia della Libia* 8 (1976). Thanks are due to Prof. L. Bacchielli for this information. Bacchielli informs me also that several other portraits have been discovered in recent years at Cyrene, all of which will be published in the near future.

3. Four of the Maltese group were published by P. C. Sestieri, "Sculture Maltesi II", *Archivio Storico Maltese* 10 (1939) fasc.3-4, pp.231-8, who erroneously recognised in them products of Maltese art in the Roman period. See A. Bonanno, "Cyrenaican funerary portraits in Malta", *JRS* 66 (1976),
4. Rosenbaum nos.201, 202, 217, 250, 256 and 270. See also D. M. Bailey, "Crowe's tomb at Benghasi", *BSA* 67 (1972) 3-4, pl.1 a-b.
5. J. Huskinson, *Roman Sculpture from Cyrenaica in the British Museum. Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani, Great Britain II*, 1 (London 1975). At present it is kept in the basement of the B.M. together with other Roman portraits. I wish to thank Mr. D. Haynes, former keeper of the Greek and Roman Antiquities Department of the B.M. for allowing me to photograph and publish this head. Thanks are also due to Dr. R. A. Higgins, present Deputy Keeper of the same Department.
6. R. M. Smith and E. A. Porcher, *History of the Recent Discoveries at Cyrene, made during an Expedition to the Cyrenaica in 1860-61* (London 1864).
7. A. H. Smith, *A Catalogue of Sculpture in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum* (London 1900-1904).
8. K. Parlasca, *Mumienportrats und verwandte Denkmäler* (Wiesbaden 1966); id. *Ritratti di mummia, Repertorio d'Arte dell'Egitto greco-romano B I* (Palermo 1969).
9. Rosenbaum 18.
10. Ibid. 15-6, pls.I-II.
11. H. Total 0.40 m; H. of head 0.23 m; max. W. 0.24 m; max. thickness 0.16 m. The marble is white with big flaky crystals probably Parian. The surface of the marble is very corroded especially on the face and hair. A large part of the nose is missing. Chips missing from eyes, eyebrows, cheeks, lips, beard and drapery. The entire surface is weathered to a dark grey colour which persists even after careful cleaning.
12. See Bonanno *JRS* 66 (1976).
13. Rosenbaum pl.LXXXIX.
14. Ibid. pl.XC.
15. Ibid. pl.LXXXVIII.
16. See, for example, the one in the Museo Nazionale, Naples: E. Paribeni, *Il Ritratto nell'Arte Antica* (Milan 1934) pl.CCXXXIII; and the one in the Conservatori Museum: M. Wegner, *Das Römische Herrscherbild*, II 3 (Berlin 1956), pl.3.
17. B. M. Felletti Maj, *Museo Nazionale Romano, I Ritratti* (Rome 1953) no.203.
18. M. Wegner, *Das Römische Herrscherbild*, II 4 (Berlin 1939), pl.4a.
19. Rosenbaum no.46, pl.XXXIII.
20. E. Esperandieu, *Receuil Général des Bas Reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine*, IX (Paris 1925) 155 no.86818
21. Rosenbaum pl.XCIII.
22. Such curls occur on portraits of Livia: V. Poulsen, *Les Portraits Romains*, I (Copenhagen 1962) no.39, Pl.LXV; Agrippina the Elder: C. Pietrangeli, "Agrippina Maggiore", *EAA* I (1958) 160, fig.231; and Antonia Minor: V. H. Poulsen, "Studies in Julio-Claudian Iconography", *Acta A* 17 (1946) 24 ff., figs.18-20.
23. Rosenbaum pl.LXXXVI.